

## Confabulation of Things Past in Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

SEYED JAVAD HABIBI

Department of Studies in English

University of Mysore, India

sjhabibi@yahoo.com

### ABSTRACT

*Confabulation is a result of memory impairment and a confabulator in many different ways produces various unreliable narratives: either by weaving a detailed narrative to fill in the gaps in his memory or by falsifying his memory due to the absence of deceitfulness occurring in clear consciousness. Concentrating on the unreliability of memory-oriented narrative, particularly, in the narratives with historiographical framework such as Ian McEwan's novel Black Dogs (1992), this article underlines various types of discrepancies among the major characters' narratives and lays bare how the memory-based narrative of the novel is crystallized from "the reconstructive theory of memory." Indeed, the object of this study is to substantiate that those inconsistencies and contradictions throw doubt on the central incident of the novel, which puts forward the assumption that the entire narrative of the novel is a confabulative.*

*Keywords: Confabulation; narrative unreliability; reconstructive memory; McEwan's Black Dogs; memory-oriented narratives.*

### INTRODUCTION

"... over the bowls of memory where every hollow holds a hallow"

*Finnegans Wake*

Ian McEwan's fifth novel *Black Dogs* (1992) deals with the reunion of narrative art with its origin, memory: a ceremony that goes back to the ancient Greek when Mnemosyne (the goddess of memory) gives birth to her nine inspiring Muses of art and literature. However, what I am going to substantiate here is that their reconciliation in this novel is problematic since the remarkable accuracy of memory in terms of reproducing its recorded materials is verified. Memory is no more retentive and it is malfunctioning. Accordingly, since memory is a prerequisite of narrative, whatever originates from it is incoherent and suffers from inconsistency. In addition, what differentiates this novel thematically and stylistically from McEwan's four early works and initiates a distinct phase in his literary career is the depiction of such a memory-based narrative. Contending with mnemonic issues, particularly the significant gaps and cracks in the reconstructive aspects of man's memory, the novel marks a departure from McEwan's earlier favourite themes; cementing the dead mother in the basement, murdering with sadomasochistic pleasure, kidnapping or dismembering of a dead body. Oscillating between past and present, through probing the memories of its characters, the novel performs a representative survey of the transition of moral stances, social views, modes of behaviour and political standpoints in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The argument here comprises four interconnected segments. Explaining the memory-based narrative of *Black Dogs* in the introductory section (part one) of the discussion, the second part is concerned with the elaboration of 'the reconstructive theory of memory' and a certain type of memory error which is a ramification of the said theoretical speculation on memory. The argument proceeds in the third section that deals exclusively with the discrepancy between June and Bernard's narratives. Highlighting the contradictory points in

June and Bernard's narrated stories and discourses, four justifiable reasons are pinpointed to prove that June's narrative of those horrific black dogs can be a fabricated narrative or 'confabulation' which is reconstructed by her. Then, another aspect of confabulative nature of the narrative of *Black Dogs* is revealed by focusing on the substantial discrepancy between the narratives of Jeremy and Bernard that are the focal points in the fourth section. The outcome of the enquiries of parts three and four is the proposition that the narrative of *Black Dogs*, because of those inconstancies and contradictions, is confabulative.

### THE MEMORY-ORIENTED NARRATIVE AND *BLACK DOGS*

As Anderson writes, "storytelling is a significant form of memory; it shapes remembering" (2005, p. 233), but the story which Jeremy narrates lays bare the unbridgeable gaps in the 'shaped' memories. The emergence of those cracks in the process of recounting the past through remembering its details problematizes the narrative of *Black Dogs* which is the textual memory of the middle age narrator Jeremy, a history –graduate, who loudly (thirteen times) declares what he is planning to recount is a 'memoir': a subtitle which McEwan never takes the risk of adding to the title of the novel. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* a 'memoir-novel' is 'a kind of novel that pretends to be a true autobiography or memoir' and John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Lady of Pleasure* (1748–9) or Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) is a prototype for this kind of writing; nevertheless, what Jeremy self-consciously attempts to write is rather a 'novel-memoir' stuck in the limbo of fact and fiction or memory and history.

As Malcolm argues, *Black Dogs* follows one of the common themes in contemporary British fiction: the problematic aspects of the "very possibility of giving an account of the past" (Malcolm 2002, p.19). According to him, the novel emphasizes "the unreliability of memory and the partiality of any version of events," and it foregrounds "motifs of interpretation," which is done by "reminding the reader of the mode of transmission of the material in the novel itself" (2002, p. 145). Jeremy himself in 'Preface' of *Black Dogs* underlines this inescapable fact: "In this memoir I have included certain incidents from my own life –in Berlin, Majdanek, Les Salces and St Maurice de Navacelles –that are open equally to Bernard and to June's kind of interpretation" (McEwan 1992, p. 19). From this perspective, *Black Dogs* can be considered as the stylistic twin of McEwan's first novel *The Cement Garden* (1978) in the sense that in both of them the memory-oriented narrative is subject to diverse interpretation, manipulation and unreliability. Analysing *The Cement Garden*, Malcolm writes, "motifs of memory, of forgetting, and of false memory recur throughout the text, all serving to reinforce a distrust of Jack as a narrator" (2002, p. 48). Moreover, the thematic approximation of McEwan's sixth novel *Enduring Love* (1997) to his *Black Dogs* is undeniable though the former emphasises on the fallibility of memory and the unreliability of the memory-oriented narrative while the latter stresses the unreliability of narrative since it is rooted in man's desire. However, referring to the presentation of the problematic nature of texts in *Black Dogs*, Malcolm believes the novel "finally suggests one can tell a story with some degree of accuracy" (2002, p.149).

Having at the back of his mind the fallibility of human memory and the unreliability of the narratives derived from it, Jeremy introduces himself as an amateur memoirist who is going to assist his parents-in-laws, June and Bernard Tremaine, to set their private history down. The format of his narrative resembles a historical document, with a table of contents, a preface along with four subsequent chapters, each named after the cities where the incidents have taken place. As far as these acts are concerned, he is an amateur biographer but the issue becomes more complicated once Jeremy's own personal life is simultaneously involved in the various courses of actions of the narrated plot. Such an involvement may lead him to be

considered an auto biographer. Nevertheless, his statement in chapter one, Wiltshire, adds a new dimension to his narrative:

We had agreed that I would write about her [June] life. Reasonably enough, she had in mind a biography, and that was what I had originally intended. But once I had made a start it began to take on another form; not a biography, not even a memoir really, more a divagation; she would be central, but it would not only be about her. (McEwan 1992, p. 37)

However, what interweaves all these titles of Jeremy together is memory: the zone that he investigates for reliable information to solidify his ‘being’. His investigative work begins when he is gradually obsessed with all the details of June and Bernard’s relationship including, their acquaintance, their budding romance, their marriage as well as their separations. According to Childs, Jeremy’s task as a private historian is not “to explain why things are as they are, but to investigate how they came about; and, above all, to chart the change in people brought about their experience” (2006, p.102).

Setting aside Jeremy’s history-oriented role in *Black Dogs*, there are some critics who focus more on Jeremy’s function as a ‘mediator’ who enters June and Bernard’s life after that traumatic incident of encountering with the black dogs and their consequential estrangement, and fills their communication gap by understanding, accepting and respecting both of them. For instance, referring to Jeremy as a “middleman,” Stoica remarks, “throughout the novel, Jeremy listens to June telling him about her relationship with her husband, and at the same time, he also hears Bernard [sic] version on the same topic, and then reflects upon his conversations with June and Bernard” (2011, p. 698).

Childs’s observation on the role of Jeremy in digging up the history of his in-laws is compatible with the function of ‘histor’ in ancient Greek. “The *histor* as narrator is not a recorder or recounter but an investigator. He examines the past with an eye toward separating out actuality from myth” (Scholes, Phelan & Kellogg 2006, p. 242). However, Jeremy probes into the past to reveal the problematic aspects of the narratives, which are memory—oriented, and magnifies the shortcomings of memory including its occasional counter—to—truth, its unreliability, its uncertainty, its falsity or its fragility. The feature, which makes the appellation of ‘histor’ suitable for Jeremy, is the distinguishing characteristic of the narrative, which is recounted by a ‘histor’. “The *histor* can present conflicting versions in his search for the truth of fact” (p. 242) and the very existence of some of these conflicting versions throughout the novel give rise to the speculation that the narrative of *Black Dogs* is a confabulation.

The term confabulation is derived from the Latin word *confābulāri* ‘con (together) and *fābulāri* (to talk),’ and the origin of *fābulāri* is *fabulā* ‘a fiction, a tale’ (Partridge 1966). Accordingly, from an etymological perspective, a confabulator is one who recounts a story that is not false. Attributing this term to mnemonic disorder, the psychologists remark, “an extreme form of pathological memory distortion is confabulation, i.e. the production of fabricated or distorted memories about one’s self or the world, without the conscious intention to deceive” (Fotopoulou, Conway, Solms et al. 2008, p.1429). Though the term will be elaborated further when the memory errors are accounted, the confabulation in brief is a result of memory impairment and the confabulator produces unreliable narratives: either by making up narratives with its details to fill in the gaps in his memory or by falsifying his memory in the absence of deceitfulness occurring in clear consciousness in association with amnesia. In a broader sense, the term confabulation refers to a wide range of phenomena that are the subjects of psychiatric, neuroscientific or psychological inquiries. However, here the focus is more on the psychological aspects of it.

The confabulation, which engenders the conflicting versions of truth for Jeremy, centres on an incident in 1946, when June and Bernard were in their honeymoon in St.

Maurice in the south of France. Confronted by two giant black mastiffs that have been trained by the Nazi to torture (rape) the prisoners during the Second World War, June miraculously hits one of them and manages to escape. The horrifying incident has a profound impact on June's later life (estranged and separated from her husband Bernard) and she converts from a Marxist sympathizer to an awakened spiritualist, a re-discoverer of God with somewhat mystical experience.

Jeremy's memory-based narration of the incidents of the novel is centred on June's horrific confrontation with the black dogs. Indeed, Jeremy's memory—oriented narrative is where the events of his own life and his in-laws are interfaced. That is why *Black Dogs* can be called 'the memory of memories' and this study attempts to explore the memory-oriented narrative of Jeremy as a 'confabulation'. Though discussion of memory is at the interface of philosophy, psychology and neuroscience, the investigation here, more or less, stresses on psycho-philosophical approach.

### THE RECONSTRUCTIVE THEORY OF MEMORY

To begin with memory *per se*, there were two speculative hypotheses about the mechanism of memory that were distinguished by Bartlett as 'reproductive memory' and 'reconstructive memory'. By reproductive memory, it means an "accurate rote production of material from memory" (Roediger and McDermott 1995, p. 803). As Eisold writes, "we tend to think that memories stored in our brains just as they are in computers. Once registered, the data are put away for safe—keeping and eventual recall" (2012). According to this view, the stimuli that are perceived remain intact throughout the process of encoding, storage and retrieval. As a result, the faithful recollection of recorded information leaves no room for error or fault. Nonetheless, both psychologists and the neuroscientists reject this hypothesis and instead the reconstructive theory of memory occupies centre stage.

According to the reconstructive theory of memory, there are substantial discrepancies between what memory records and what it produces later. In other words, "if perceiving is a construction, then remembering the original experience involves a reconstruction," not a reproduction (Roediger & DeSoto 2001, p.12844). There are certain elements which intervene in the process of encoding including the trace of the past events in man's life and his general knowledge, expectations or assumptions about what must have happened which make the reliable recollection of the recorded past approximately impossible. Bartlett believes that the reconstructive memory "emphasizes the active process of filling in missing elements" (Roediger & McDermott 1995, p. 803). Indeed, the intervention of cognitive functions such as individual perceptions or inferences along with social influences in the process of recalling leads to an unfaithful reconstruction of what has been recorded. The neuroscientists substantiated this phenomenon too. According to Eisold, each time a person remembers something, he is reconstructing the event, reassembling it from traces throughout the brain (2012). Accordingly, the recollection of the original events may be inevitably filled with attendant errors.

Framing the argument here based on the psychological aspects of those reconstructive errors rather than philosophical conceptions of them, the very existence of a few memory errors in Jeremy's memory-based narrative in *Black Dogs* constitutes the prime evidence for reconstructive processes in Jeremy's remembering of his own past as well as his in-laws. In fact, this compatibility between Jeremy's narrative and reconstructive memory causes unavoidable errors, which lead to distorted presentation and consequently, the unreliability of the narrated events. As a self-conscious narrator, Jeremy in various scenes openly confesses the erroneous nature of memory. For instance, Jeremy refers to the memory of the suburb of Warsaw and Lublin in his first visit to Poland as "unreliable" (McEwan 1992, p.109) or in

one of his visits to June in the Chestnut Reach Nursing Home, when she attempts to recollect her memory of the traumatic incidents of 1946, Jeremy informs the reader that “each time it [June’s narrative] came out a little differently” (p. 38).

Apart from Jeremy’s direct references to the erroneous aspect of memory in his narration of *Black Dogs* and to the doubtfulness of the narrative originated from it, some memory errors bring about unbridgeable structural gaps throughout the text and transmute Jeremy’s narrative to confabulation. To analyse those errors arising from Jeremy’s reconstructive memory, Daniel Schacter’s categorization of the seven types of errors has been taken into account and the affinity between one of them (though there are more than one) and those memory errors occurred in *Black Dogs* is elaborated. Comparing memory malfunctions with the seven deadly sins in Roman Catholic Church, Schacter asserts that there are seven fundamental memory errors including “transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias and persistence” (2001, p. 4). Schacter calls the first three types of errors “the sins of omission” since “we fail to bring to mind a desired fact, event, or idea, (p. 4)” and he refers to the remaining four memory errors as “the sins of commission” because “some form of memory is present, but it is either incorrect or unwanted”(p. 5)

### THREE INSTANCES OF DISCREPANCY BETWEEN JUNE AND BERNARD’S NARRATIVES

“Transience” is the first kind of memory error which Schacter brings into attention and it refers to a “weakening or loss of memory over time” (2001, p.4). This type of memory deterioration occurs gradually with the passage of time and the generalisation of the subject’s specific knowledge or idea is one of the significant aspects of this common type of memory error. Due to this type of error, the corners of the recorded memories (e.g. their temporal, special or causal aspects) are cut from memory throughout human life. This type of memory error brings about the first kind of discrepancy between Bernard and June’s accounts about their memories of their first sexual intercourse. The first direct interaction between Jeremy and his mother-in-law that is presented to the reader is in the Chestnut Reach Nursing Home in 1987 while 67- year-old June feebly attempts to recollect her 31-year-old memory of his life. Indeed the differences between June’s narrative and Bernard’s in terms their first affair can be summarised into three categories: place, time, and the quality of their experience. June begins her narration with a remark that she has “forgotten” the reason of finding themselves alone in the guest room of the house of her girlfriend’s parents in London (McEwan 1992, p. 55). The time of their first love affair, according to June is before their marriage in 1946 and as June says, “it might have been a week later [after their first affair] Bernard came home and met my parents” (p. 57). In respect to the quality of their experience, June expresses that Bernard “suddenly leaped up and ran to the window, threw it open to the storm and stood there naked, long and thin and white, beating his chest and yodelling like Tarzan while leaves came swirling in. It was so stupid! D’you know, he made me laugh so hard that I widdled on the bed” (p. 57).

However, Bernard’s narration of his first love affair with June is radically different. Accompanying Bernard two years later in 1989 on a journey to Berlin for watching the collapse of the Wall of Berlin, Jeremy discloses to Bernard June’s narrative of his Tarzan-like noises after his experience which Bernard vehemently rejects and says:

Good Lord! That wasn’t then! That was two years later. That was in Italy, when we were living above old man Massimo and his scraggy wife. They wouldn’t have any noise in the house. We used to do it outside, in the fields, anywhere we could find. Then one night there’s this tremendous storm blowing up, forced us indoors, so noisy they didn’t hear us anyway. (McEwan 1992, p. 85)

Besides, his reaction to their first love affair is very different from what June has described earlier in terms of place and time. Even alluding to their first love affair, Bernard remarks that “Our first time was a disaster, a complete bloody disaster” (p. 86).

Of course there is no accurate reliable indication in the text that shows which of those two narratives is reliable since in 1989 (when Jeremy is collecting his shorthand’s for his memoir) the memory of old Bernard is as fallible as June’s memory and accordingly it is subject to the transient memory error too. Besides, the narrator, Jeremy, does not strive to resolve this ambiguity (since both of the narratives are neat and convincing) and to assure his reader of a reliable narrative between those two narratives. A justification for Jeremy’s silence and merely taking notes of these different narratives of a unique experience is that he knows when the events and their emotional attachments are dislocated from their original time and place and relocated in memory. Therefore, these relocated events occupy a fresh time and place with new emotional bonds that are the sources of inevitable discrepancies among the narratives. Therefore, Jeremy’s ‘final fix’ may be an allusion to this mechanism of memory in terms of June’s recollection of the memory of Bernard: “As I wrote I wondered, ungenerously, if I was being used – as a conduit, a medium for the final fix June wanted to put on her life. This thought made me less uncomfortable about not writing the biography she wanted” (McEwan 1992, p. 40).

Therefore, Jeremy objectively recounts both of June and Bernard’s narratives to show the reconstructive nature of memory to his reader, though, according to Malcolm, Jeremy “certainly knows that the account she gives of her husband’s present circumstances is a parody of the truth” (p. 146). Another reason for Jeremy’s passivity in terms of those underlined differences is that since his memory-based narrative does not have a solid foundation, he prefers to throw it open for interpretation. Besides, Jeremy is self-consciously aware that the narration *per se* is an act of interpretation and interpretation is invariably vulnerable to the possibility of misinterpretation. Enconced in this matrix Jeremy prefers the safety of indifference. However, Stoica believes that Jeremy’s neutrality between the contradictory narratives of June and Bernard is because of his incredulity to their double narratives:

As June and Bernard’s memories cannot be entirely trusted, Jeremy remains the voice that reunites all the perspectives and transforms the subjective dispatched memories into a unified and much more believable view. Jeremy tries to put things in order and find his way through their memory tricks and the illusions of their own subjectivity: “I once asked Bernard about his first meeting with June during the war. What drew him to her? He remembered no first encounter” (23). (2011, p. 700)

This serious inconsistency between June and Bernard’s narratives puts forward the proposition that their version of memory error, transience, has brought about confabulation or false memory. According to Dalla Barba “confabulation occurs when previously experienced events are misplaced in time or context” (qtd. in Bortolotti & Cox 2009, p. 952). In other words, June or Bernard is recollecting inaccurate details of their first love affair and displacing them in a different plane of time and place. As far as the aetiology of this phenomenon is concerned, Bortolotti and Cox summarized many cognitive neuropsychological accounts into four types of deficits:

a deficit in retrieval strategies (e.g., inability to access relevant memories); confusion of the temporal order of remembered events (e.g., inability to determine chronology); a deficit in the construction of memories (e.g., exaggerated memory reconstruction); poor source monitoring (e.g., something imagined is reported as something remembered) (p. 954).

The second instance of discrepancy between June and Bernard’s narratives that result in a structural confabulation while affecting the reliability of the entire narrative of *Black Dogs* is the very existence of those two black dogs. In fact, there are considerable evidences

(four of them have been pin pointed here) which cast doubt on June's account of her encounter with the black dogs. Even, intentionally or unintentionally, the structure of Jeremy's narrative directs the reader to those doubts and uncertainties about the actuality of those dogs in June's story. The reason for this claim is that Jeremy raises the issue of the narrative unreliability by illustrating the significant discrepancy between June and Bernard's stories of their first sexual intercourse and then later he discloses to the reader the details of his parents-in-law's honeymoon in southern France, June's encounter with those two giant black dogs and the story of the Maire (the mayor of St. Maurice de Navacelles) about Gestapo's trained black dogs. Therefore, such a narrative design makes the base of those narratives shaky and the reader after those preliminary chapters no more trusts them. In other words, the theme of the unreliability of memory-oriented narratives is explored in the novel through not only the characters' contradictory remarks but also the structure of the narrative and the proper distribution of major incidents through specific chapters. In sum, the foundation of June's macabre story about her encounter with those dogs is shaky since it is presented in the last chapter, the fourth one.

Before uncovering those four compelling reasons which transform June's narrative of those dogs to a confabulated story, an important point has to be clarified, which is those incidents recounted by Jeremy in chapter four are based on Bernard's memory, and not June's. In other words, there is no direct reference to the climactic incidents that occurred in the village of St. Maurice throughout chapter one where Jeremy interviews with June and consequently all the details which are depicted later in chapter four needs to be derived from Bernard's memory. Even in chapter two, *Berlin*, Jeremy requests Bernard to tell him about the Maire's story of those black dogs and this is an indication that June did not tell Jeremy the whole story about the mastiffs: "The last time I saw June she told me to ask you[ Bernard] what the Maire of St. Maurice de Navacelles said about those dogs when you had lunch at the café that afternoon" (McEwan 1992, p.104). A justification for June's decision can be the fact that she is not able to verbalise that traumatic incident accurately in detail, though the memory of that horrifying encounter was with her till her death and changed her life.

The first cogent reason that casts severe doubt on the possible existence of those black dogs narrated by June is that Bernard did not see them. A three hundred yard distance and a hairpin bend in the track separated the couple while Bernard aroused by his "scientific curiosity" was sketching "a caravan of two dozen brown furry caterpillars," and June's "voice sounded thin in the sunny air" at the sight of those two giant dogs (McEwan 1992, p. 147). Consequently, Bernard was not physically able to catch sight of those dogs or hear June's voice shouting his name over three times. Besides, when Bernard found June sitting on the path well over a quarter of the hour, he "did not see the bloodied knife and June forgot to pick it up" (152). Even Jeremy in chapter one points to the absence of Bernard: "I had heard it [the story of June's encountering the dogs] often enough from Bernard who was not, in the strictest sense, a witness" (49). Moreover, as a 'seeing-is-believing' rationalist, Bernard does not acknowledge June's narrative. As Stoica argues Bernard is "an unshakable materialist, rational, always looking for a logical explanation and concerned only with matters that can be perceived through the five senses" (2011, p. 697).

However, Bernard's scepticism about June's story of her encounter with those two black dogs springs from the fact that June interprets them as an incarnation of evil accompanied by an epiphanic appreciation of God in the form of "coloured invisible light that surrounded her and contained her"(McEwan 1992, p. 150). Bymes refers to this state of mind 'enantiodromia' which is "the process by which June's experience of pure evil, in the shape of the black dogs, is immediately followed by a personal revelation of God, the spontaneous realisation of the positive aspect of the central archetype of the Self experienced as a living entity in the inner world" (1999, p. 166). For a Cambridge science graduate like Bernard who

was a committed communist sympathiser until 1956, June's account of her "face to face with evil" is "nonsense" (McEwan 1992, p. 104). Even the ghost of Bernard at the closing scene of the novel—where Jeremy is reading the two pages of shorthand of his last conversation with June—debunks June's idea of encountering evil: "I'll tell you [Jeremy] what she was up against that day – a good lunch and a spot of malicious village gossip!" (p.173). However, unlike Bernard, Jeremy prefers to remain silent in the face of June's symbolic interpretation of those black dogs as he earlier in the preface of the novel asserts, "Whether June's black dogs should be regarded as a potent symbol, a handy catch phrase, evidence of her credulity or a manifestation of a power that really exists, I cannot say" (p. 19).

The second reason that calls into question the existence of those two black dogs is a series of June's doubtfulness about those two giant animals. Focused by the narrator, in her first glimpse of those dogs that are a hundred yard ahead, June thinks that they are a pair of donkeys (McEwan 1992, p.143). Then she perceives that they are two giant mastiffs, yet perception does not resolve her uncertainty because the size of the dogs in those starving and ration-food period of the post Second World War appear fairly unusual; moreover, as she contemplates more she comes to know that "in this landscape, where the working animals were small and wiry, there was no use for dogs the size of donkeys"(p. 144). Moreover, in their journey to Berlin, Bernard reveals June's familiarity with Churchill's black dogs, "the name he gave to the depressions he used to get from time to time" (p. 104), to Jeremy. As Bernard explains, June even extends the meaning of black dogs: "So June's idea was that if one dog was a personal depression, two dogs were a kind of cultural depression, civilisation's worst moods" (104). Besides, Jeremy's note about his last visit of June before her death is considerable, particularly when she discloses, "there animals [those two black dogs] are the creation of debased imagination, of perverted spirits no amount of social theory could account" (p. 172).

Besides, from a psychological perspective, as Bymes (1999) argues in her study of McEwan's novels, "the black dogs are a powerful symbol from the universal unconscious. Black usually denotes death, the shadow or the evil side of the psyche and dogs or other dangerous animals stand for man's animal nature, his instincts and uncivilised impulses" (p. 165). So the misrecognition and the substitution of one animal for another in the traumatic matrix of 1946, the time of human propensity for unmitigated evil as evidenced during the Second World War, is not a totally debunked hypothesis. In sum, June's astonished disbelief in what she is observing paves the way for the next assumption that underpins June's mental instability just before her confronting those black dogs.

In fact, as the third reason, that of June's transitional mental confusion, which can be read as the result of the post-war depression, in the scene that leads to the fabrication of that story, throws doubt about the reality of June's black dogs. The narrator, Jeremy, in the fourth chapter discloses that June had an eerie premonition about what might happen on that morning just before her encounter with the dogs: "They [dogs] were emblems of the menace she had felt, they were the embodiment of the nameless, unreasonable, unmentionable disquiet she had experienced that morning"( McEwan 1992, pp.144-45). The juxtaposition of June's state of mind before that horrifying incident with her later contemplation on the existence of those dogs –"What she feared more than the presence of the dogs was the possibility of their absence, of their not existing at all"—raises the possibility of June's misrecognition of those animals, particularly when she herself confesses, "she did not believe in ghosts. But she did believe in madness" (p.145).

The fourth reason which increases the degree of uncertainty about the existence of the dogs in June's scare story is some obvious contradiction between the Maire's story of the Gestapo's trained black dogs in St. Maurice and what Mme Auriac articulates as evidenced in their discourses in Hôtel des Tilleuls in St. Maurice, in the aftermath of June's terrifying



encounter. The first contradiction is that after listening to June's story the Maire remarks, "we had this once before," he said. 'Last winter. Remember?' but Mme Auriac (who lives there for a long time) disagrees with him: "I didn't hear about it" (p.156). The word "remember" in this conversation is a watchword since it proposes the idea that this discrepancy is a matter of memory error. Their second disagreement arises about Danielle Bertrand (the strange widow who was living in St. Maurice). According to the Maire, who refers to the eyewitness account of the Sauvy brothers, Danielle is humiliatingly raped by the Gestapo's black dogs, whereas Mme Auriac vehemently rejects his story and explains, "the Sauvy brothers are a couple of drunks" who fabricated this story "to add to her shame" since Danielle "was pretty and she lived alone and she didn't think she owed you [the Maire] or anyone else an explanation" (p. 161). Malcolm's uncertainty about the reality of the Rape of Danielle is significant too: "All the sentences that suggest that Danielle has been raped not by the Gestapo but by their dog are incomplete (135–36). The reader is required to supply the ending based on an interpretation of context" (2002, p.148). The reaction of Bernard to the Maire's story is in harmony with Mme Auriac's attitude.

The significant point in disclosing the story of Danielle's rape is the four layers of the various narrators which the reader has to peel away to reach the kernel. In fact, there are three reconstructive memories (except the Sauveys brothers who claimed that they had been eyewitnesses) are at work to transfer this incident to the reader. Considering Jeremy's "minor embellishments" and the errors that may happen in the retrieval process in the memory of every one of the narrators, the reliability of the story about Danielle's rape can be poor.

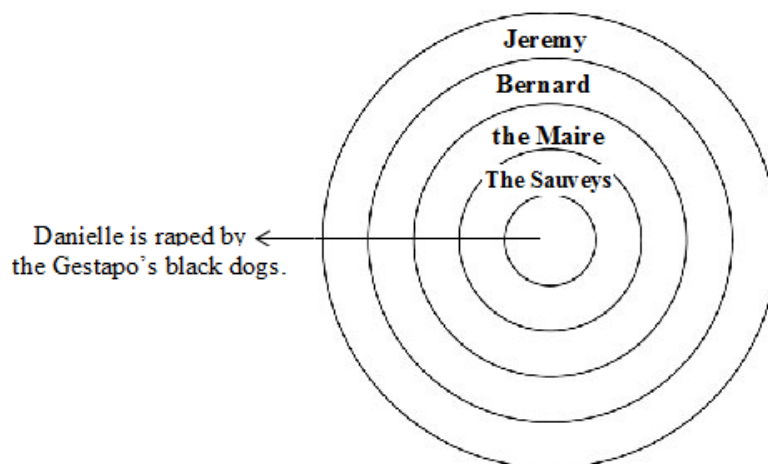



FIGURE 1. The four layers of the narrators engaged with Danielle's story in *Black Dogs*

Pointing to the Maire's account of Danielle's rape as an indication of transition in McEwan's mode of portraying macabre scenes as compared with his earlier novels, Bymes writes that the author "sets it in the historical past, attributes it to the work of the Gestapo and has the story has the story mentioned by the Maire against the protests of Mme Auriac so that the reader is not sure if this is a fact"(1999, p. 166). Finally, the ambiguity in the Maire's account of those black dogs becomes more intensified when Jeremy exposes that although the Maire repeatedly emphasises that he will send his men to hunt the dogs he never really send any body: "the Maire did not manage to despatch a posse of villagers into the gorge that afternoon. Nor had anything happened by the following morning" (McEwan 162).

To distinguish June's confabulated narration from other similar instances of false or unjustified belief, an adaptation of Hirstein's detailed model of a confabulatory proposition is appropriate in this context. Offering six characteristics of a confabulator (though only four of them are applicable to June's story), Hirstein in his book *Brain Fiction* defines that a suspected subject confabulates a proposition if and only if (2005, p. 225-6):

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| (1) subject claims that proposition                        |  | These four characteristics are applicable to June's proposition (her narrative of those black dogs). |
| (2) subject believes that proposition                      |   |  |
| (3) subject does not know that his thought is ill-grounded |   |  |
| (4) subject is confident of that proposition               |   |  |
| (5) subject should know that his thought is ill-grounded   |   |  |
| (6) subject thought that proposition is ill-grounded       |   |  |

Indeed, June's complete confidence about her claim insinuates that she has never considered that her story of encountering the black dogs originates from her ill-grounded thought and that the very existence of those dogs transform into a kind belief for June.

Once again, the reaction of Jeremy to this discrepancy between the Maire and Mme Auriac is significant. Like in the previous situation (June-Bernard first love affair), Jeremy attempts only to concentrate passively on his "historical duty": to account objectively for the incidents and discourses in his in-laws' life. As he observes in the second chapter, "It [June's encounter with the dogs] was a story whose historical accuracy was of less significance than the function it served. It was a myth, all the more powerful for being upheld as documentary" (McEwan 1992, p. 50). This observation is in synchrony with the point that the reader can hear from Jeremy in his contemplation on June's traumatic experience just before his disclosure of the entire story of the black dogs in St. Maurice: "for the first time she [June] realised that her experience was complete; it was at worst a vivid memory. It was a story, one which she came out of well" (p. 154). Labelling clearly June's narrative of her encounter as "memory" and "story," Jeremy maintains the reconstructive attitude to memory and its inescapable errors that bring into being confabulation. According to Bortolotti and Cox, "most typically, people confabulate when they make statements or tell stories which might be either inaccurate or badly supported by the available evidence. The 'story' is genuinely believed by the subject reporting it; it can also be endorsed with some conviction, and maintained in the face of counterarguments" (2009, p. 952). In sum, June's confabulation vis-à-vis the reality of those dogs in her narrative is more compatible with this definition of confabulation: "confabulation is the result of never-experienced events being misattributed as real (Johnson, Hashtroudi & Lindsay 2013, p. 952)

Although these four-fold justifications verify the hypothesis that June's story of her encounter with the black dogs can be her confabulation, McEwan's true intention is not to pencil a false narrative. In other words, since the author's overriding aim is to pencil how memory-based narratives are really rolling over the border of truth and untruth, he develops the counter argument too by providing the reader with some clues to the existence of those dogs. For instance, when Bernard finds June a quarter of an hour after the incident, he notices "a curving row of punctures" and "a streak of foam" in the canvas of June's rucksack (McEwan 1992, p. 152); or in Hôtel des Tilleuls, Mme Auriac discerns blood on June's right hand: "she saw June's right hand and, mistaking the blood there, she took it in her own and exclaimed, 'That's a bad cut, you poor wee thing'" (p. 154). Effectively, to-be-or-not-to-be issue of those giant black dogs in June's story enforces the coexistence of the both accounts that open up multiple (competing) interpretations.

The third type of discrepancy between June and Bernard's narratives is the memory of the woman who was in black for the death of her husband and her two brothers in the fourth chapter of the novel. Leaving Mme Auriac's in St. Maurice in the aftermath of June's encountering those two black dogs, June and Bernard arrived at a forked main road near La Vacquerie where they saw "on the far side of the street, in the deep shadow of a doorway, a youngish woman in black was also watching. She was so pale they assumed at first she had some sort of wasting disease. She remained perfectly still, with one hand holding an edge of her headscarf so that it obscured her mouth" (p.164). Here, Jeremy's detailed descriptions of the location, the woman's age, and the colour of her clothes, her posture and her gesture are so accurate that there seems no reason to doubt the existence of such a woman. Even Jeremy adds Bernard's reflection on this touching scene: "Bernard was to remember this moment for the rest of his life" (p. 164). However, this assurance does not stay for a long time since quickly in the next passage Jeremy, who is reconstructing Bernard's memory so far in this chapter, discloses that "June knew Bernard's description of this moment, but claimed to have no memory of the woman in black that was actually her own" (p. 165). This contradiction once again highlights the issue of transient memory error and emphasises on the partiality and the limited accuracy of any memory-oriented account that leads to various (valid) interpretation; however, June's invalidation of the existence of the woman in black can be considered June's revenge for Bernard's disapproval of the reality of those dogs in June's story.

These three instances of substantial discrepancies among June and Bernard's narratives that cause diverse conflicting interpretations can produce the Rashomon effect<sup>i</sup>. This phenomenon emerges when the various conflicting versions of the same (traumatic) event offered by their narrators are equally plausible and convincing. In terms of *Black Dogs*, these conflicting narratives, which have equal (in)validity, lay the groundwork for those various subsequent interpretations which constitute "motifs of interpretation" in the novel. According to Malcolm, *Black Dogs* "emphasizes the process of the interpretation of any facts and how different interpretations may be" and he refers to chapter one where Jeremy, in his regular visits to June in the nursing home in Wiltshire, is looking at June's framed photograph dated 1946: "How one looks at photographs...depends on where one is" (2002, p. 147). Finally, as Jeremy himself insists his narrative work (a memoir of his in-laws) is open to both June's metaphysical interpretations as well as Bernard's rationalistic one (McEwan, 1992, p. 19).

#### DISCREPANCY BETWEEN JEREMY AND BERNARD'S NARRATIVES

Another instance of confabulation that can be highlighted in *Black Dogs* is the result of the glaring contradiction between Jeremy and Bernard's narratives. Before introducing this type of discrepancy that occurs in the fourth chapter, the reader gets enlightened beforehand in chapter two about Jeremy and Bernard's schemes of thought and raises serious doubt about their narratives. Attributing the unreliability of Bernard's narratives to his Marxist ideological stance, the author portrays Bernard as a character who "ignored or reshaped a few uncomfortable facts for the cause of Party unity"(McEwan 1992, p. 89); indeed, Bernard's unreliability is the inheritance of Communism which, through Jeremy's words, "was a network of privileges and corruption and licensed violence, a mental disease, an array of laughable, improbable lies and, most tangibly, the instrument of occupation by a foreign power" (p. 107). Besides, Bernard's science background affects his unreliability, particularly when he attempts to bring biological justification to his narrative inconsistency: "Laboratory work teaches you better than anything how easy it is to bend a result to fit a theory. It is not even a matter of dishonesty. It is in our nature –our desires permeate our perceptions. A well-

designed experiment guards against it” (p. 89). To be concise, science and Marxist political ideology have moulded an unreliable character like Bernard.

Jeremy, as the author –narrator of this memoir is infallible and his memory-based narrative cannot remain intact in the face of the errors of his reconstructive memory. For Jeremy the reconstructive memory probably works like what Bernard does in looking at girls to reconstruct the trace of June after her death: “I’m always searching for a gesture, an expression, something about the eyes or the hair, anything that will keep her alive for me”(McEwan 83). Or it may operate like what Mme Auriac does in retelling June’s story of the dogs to the Maire: rewording with “only minor embellishments.” (p. 155). Nevertheless, the accumulation of these “minor” changes occurred in the process recollecting memory throughout the novel formulates the hypothesis that Jeremy’s narrative is entirely a confabulation. This supposition is noticeable in the ghost of June’s monologue addressed to Jeremy in her *bergerie* in the southern France: “You’re [Jeremy] inventing us [June and Bernard] both, extrapolating from what you know” (p. 119).

Moreover, Jeremy’s personal involvement in the mnemonic recollection of his in-laws’ forgotten history, according to Rimmon-Kenan (2002, p.103), makes him an unreliable first person narrator, particularly when he directly asserts that his memory is “unreliable.” For instance, in describing the weather of the days when Jeremy goes to visit June in her nursing home, he obliquely insists on the fallibility of his memory and writes, “In memory each of my few visits to her in the nursing home in the spring and summer of 1987 took place on days of rain and high wind. Perhaps there was only one such day, and it has blown itself across the others” (McEwan 1002, p. 28). Besides, his unreliable memory is invariably accompanied with his uncertainty that can shake the foundation of June’s story that is the centrepiece of his memoir. For example, his critique of considering June’s traumatic experience as a ‘turning point’ in her life is an instance of his uncertainty that throws doubt on June’s story:

I was both beguiled and sceptical. Turning-points are the inventions of story-tellers and dramatists, a necessary mechanism when a life is reduced to, traduced by, a plot, when a morality must be distilled from a sequence of actions, when an audience must be sent home with something unforgettable to mark a character’s growth. Seeing the light, the moment of truth, the turning-point, surely we borrow these from Hollywood or the Bible to make retroactive sense of an overcrowded memory? June’s ‘black dogs’. (p. 50)  
That is why Saynor remarks: “Jeremy is all uncertainty” (1992, pp. 8-9).

Jeremy’s uncertainty or unreliability is particularly perceptible in the discrepancy between his narrative and Bernard’s. Jeremy, who is recapitulating Bernard’s old memory, depicts a mason who “was cutting in half a dozen fresh names” on a stone base of an iron cross (McEwan 1992, p. 164). Reconstructing the scene in accordance with Bernard’s memory, Jeremy narrates that the couple sees this monument at a forked main road near La Vacquerie in 1946, on the day following June’s horrific encounter with those black dogs. However, when Jeremy himself in 1989 walked through Vacquerie, he visited the base of the iron cross and he “found that the base of the monument was inscribed with Latin quotations. There were no names of the war dead” (p. 165). Here once again, the gates of interpretation swing open and the reader is bewildered by these memory-based contradictory narratives.

The inconsistency that arises here between Jeremy and Bernard’s narratives remain unsolved and again the reader cannot determine which of them is reliable. On the one hand, Bernard’s inaccurate recollection of his memory (again because of his transient memory error) underpins the basic assumption that he has confabulated those inscribed names since the inscription of war dead is more coherent, internally consistent, and relatively normal in terms of the setting of the Second World War than the Latin quotations. On the other, Jeremy’s narrative may be touched by ‘a minor embellishment’ to make Bernard’s fallible

memory more noticeable since his love for June is indisputable, a point, which is emphasised by Bymes: “whenever Bernard attacks her position he springs to her defence” (1999, p. 158). In sum, the inability of the reader to distinguish the ill-grounded narrative between these two narrations of that inscription is at the cost of Jeremy’s losing his reliability because, after all Jeremy is the narrator-author and the concatenation of events is filtered through his mind and is textualised in his memoir while Bernard is only a character .

The assumption of Jeremy’s unreliability can be coupled with his confabulation of June-Bernard discourse after June’s death (while he comes to prepare his inherent *bergerie* , a country house, in the southern France for coming holidays) which is one of the best examples which signifies that Jeremy is capable of confabulating too. Spreading his notes for writing his memoir on the kitchen table, while he was temporarily residing in June’s *bergerie*, he hears the late June and Bernard’s voices who are discussing. Preceding this scene, Jeremy in the poor light of the *bergerie* is nearly stung by a scorpion that has nested in a cupboard there for a long time. Discerning Jeremy’s sceptical look, the voice of the late June commences first and directly addresses Jeremy: “How can you pretend to doubt what’s staring you in the face? How can you be so perverse, Jeremy? You sensed my presence as soon as you stepped into the house” (McEwan, 1992, p. 117). Here June claims that she warned him against the scorpion and protected him while he was sceptical about his power of feelings. June’s ghost also claims that it saved Bernard when he was attacked by swastikas in Berlin. However, as a counter argument, Jeremy confabulates Bernard’s response too. Bernard states, “If this is the level of the dead’s concern, why aren’t they interceding to prevent the millions of human tragedies that happen every day?” (p. 118).

If we follow Bernard’s view, the discourses confabulated here are the product of Jeremy’s reconstructive memory. As Bernard argues, Jeremy has recreated June’s voice in the *bergerie* since “ it was once her place, is still full of her things and that being here, especially after an absence and before your own family has filled up the rooms, is bound to prompt thoughts of her.” Alternatively, in terms of the scorpion, Bernard believes, “you had the buried memory of finding a nest of scorpions there. And you ought to consider the possibility that in poor light [of June’s *bergerie*] you discerned the scorpion’s shape subliminally” (McEwan 1992, p. 118). The uniqueness of this section throughout the novel is that Jeremy not only confabulates his in-laws’ contradictory stances through digging up his own memory of them but also gets involved in their heated argument and interacts with them: “I tried joining in. ‘Listen, you two. You’re in separate realms, you’re out of each other’s area of competence. It’s not the business of science to prove or disprove the existence of God and it’s not the business of the spirit to measure the world” (p.120). In fact, Jeremy’s personal involvement in both June and Bernard’s real and unreal life generates quandary about his narrative. After the scene in the *bergerie*, the reader distrusts Jeremy’s narrative, especially when he phones his wife, Jenny, and complains that he may “be going mad.” Jenny’s answer is a firm indication that what Jeremy has narrated as far as his memoir can be a confabulation: “You wanted their stories. You encouraged them, you courted them. Now you’ve got them, quarrels and all.” Then Jenny sarcastically suggests that he write down what they [June and Bernard’s ghosts] are saying. Finally, Jenny summarizes that Jeremy’s obsession with them is his nemesis: “punished for stirring it up” which was imposed by her mother (p. 120). By the end of this section, the reader has to re-evaluate what Jeremy has recounted about June or Bernard.

In sum, concentrating on the unreliability of the memory-oriented narratives in *Black Dogs*, it can be concluded that the various types of discrepancies among the major characters’ narratives lay bare how the narratives originated from man’s reconstructive memory are unreliable. Besides, those inconstancies and contradictions among the highlighted narratives throw doubt on the central incident of the novel, which puts forward the assumption that the

entire narrative of the novel is confabulative. Indeed, the elaboration of those hypothetical discrepancies connotes that the major portion of Jeremy's narrative in *Black Dogs* can be "his own confabulation," which may be derived from extreme threat or agony in his childhood. As he discloses later, there was "blackness, the hollow feeling of unbelonging" (McEwan, 1992, p.10) which devastated his life until his marriage. The unbearable dread and excruciating agony causes Jeremy to confabulate the dreadful story of those black dogs and ascribe it to June.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Rashomon effect" is termed after Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*, where four crime witnesses provide four contradictory versions of the same incident.

#### REFERENCES

- Anderson, P.S. (2005). An Ethics of Memory: Promising, Forgiving, Yearning. In G. Ward (Ed.). *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Bortolotti, L. and Cox, R. (2009). Faultless' Ignorance: Strengths and Limitations of Epistemic Definitions of Confabulation. *Consciousness and Cognition Volume 18*, 952–965.
- Bymes, C. (1999). *The Work of Ian McEwan: A Psychodynamic Approach*. (Doctoral thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, England)
- Childs, P. (Ed.). (2006). *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eisold, K. (2012). Unreliable Memory: Why Memory's Unreliable, and What We Can Do about It. *Psychology Today 12 Mar. 2012*. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hidden-motives/201203/unreliable-memory>.
- Partridge, E. (Ed.). (1966). *Fable. Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. 4<sup>th</sup> (ed.) London: Routledge-Taylor.
- Fotopoulou, A., M. A. Conway, M. Solms, S. Tyrer and M. Kopelman. (2008). Self-Serving Confabulation in Prose Recall. *Neuropsychologia Volume 46*, 1429–41.
- Hirstein, W. (2005). *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation*. Cambridge: MIT.
- Jingo, M. (Producer), & Kurosawa, A. (Director). (1950). *Rashomon* [Motion picture]. Japan: Daiei Film Co., Ltd.
- Johnson, M. K., S. Hashtroudi and S.D. Lindsay. (2013). Source Monitoring. *Psychological Bulletin Volume 114, Number 1*, 3–28.
- Malcolm, D. (2002). *Understanding Ian McEwan*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- McEwan, I. (1992). *Black Dogs*. London: Vintage-Random, 1998.
- Memoir-novel. (2001). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. In C. Baldick (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2002). *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> (Ed.) London: Routledge.
- Roediger, H. L. and K. B. McDermott. (1995). Creating False Memories: Remembering Words Not Presented in Lists. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition Volume 21, Number 4*, 803–14.
- Roediger, H. L. and K. A. DeSoto. (2001). Psychology of Reconstructive Memory. In N. J. Smelser and P. B. Baltes (Eds.). *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 12844–49. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Saynor, J. (1992). Hell in a Country Lane. *Observer 14 June 1992*, 8–9.
- Schacter, D. L. (2001). *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*. Boston: Mifflin.
- Scholes, R., J. Phelan and R. Kellogg. (2006). *The Nature of the Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stoica, I. (2011). Multiple Faces of Reality in the novel *Black Dogs* by Ian McEwan. *Proceedings of International Conference on European Integration between Tradition and Modernity, October 27–28, 2011. Volume 3*, 696–701. Târgu-Mureş: Universitatea Petru Maior.